

Independent Reviewing Service Annual Report

April 2023-March 2024



SURREY
COUNTY COUNCIL

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Executive Summary

This Annual Report produced by the Independent Reviewing Service is prepared in accordance with the statutory requirement to inform the Corporate Parenting Board and senior leaders about the Council's performance in respect of children in the care of the local authority.

The report covers the reporting period April 2023 to March 2024. The service has had a busy year, similar to previous years. Data in this report is based on information taken from Tableau, Surrey Children's Services' performance data system and the Safeguarding Unit's logbooks, on 9th June 2024.

At the end of March 2024 Surrey had 963 looked after children in our care. There has been a continued decrease in the number of children becoming looked compared to previous years and an increase in the number of children's care journeys ending. During 2023/24 371 children became looked after (new to care) compared to 385 children in 2022/23 and 450 children in 2021/22. Full demographics are contained below.

In this context the IRO Service has continued to provide high levels of support to children and young people, our Review timeliness is high, and we have taken the learning from different areas to improve our services to children in our care. There are areas of performance that we know we need to improve but there are action plans to drive those improvements forward. We have extended our Review timeline to provide independent oversight to the first Review post-18 following a 'Preventing Future Deaths Report' from the Surrey Coroner's Court. We have reviewed a range of forms to improve the user experience and gather better information. And we have provided 'Pen Pictures' of our staff so that children and young people have a better sense of those who are involved in their care. The Service has recruited a number of new permanent staff, and although this is an area for continued work. This will contribute to our children having a consistent relationship over the long term.

1. The Legal Context and Purpose of the service

The Independent Reviewing Service has been a statutory requirement since 2004. In 2010 the government published the '[Independent Reviewing Officer's Handbook](#)'¹, which is statutory guidance for IROs and local authorities. This was implemented in April 2011 and was linked to the revised [Care Planning Regulations and Guidance](#)² (2010). The responsibilities of the IRO have been broadened to include not only the management of the review process but a wider overview of the case, including regular monitoring and follow up between reviews.

The statutory duties of the IRO are to [\[section 25B \(1\), 1989 Act\]](#):³

- monitor the performance by the local authority of their functions in relation to the child's case.
- participate in any review of the child's case.
- ensure that any ascertained wishes and feelings of the child concerning the case are given due consideration by the appropriate authority; and
- perform any other function which is prescribed in regulations.

The core tasks of the IRO are defined as follows:

¹ [iro statutory guidance iros and las march 2010 tagged.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

² [The Children Act 1989 guidance and regulations \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

³ [Children Act 1989 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](#)

- The primary task of the IRO is to ensure the care plan for the child fully reflects the child's current needs and that the actions set out in the plan are consistent with the local authority's legal responsibilities towards the child. As corporate parents, each local authority should act for the children they look after as a responsible and conscientious parent would act.
- The IRO also has a duty to monitor the performance of the local authority's function as a corporate parent and to identify any areas of poor practice. This should include identifying patterns of concern. Where IROs identify more general concerns around the quality of the authority's services to its looked after children, the IRO should alert senior managers. Equally important, the IRO should recognise and report on good practice.

There are two clear and separate aspects to the function of the IRO:

- chairing the child's review; and
- monitoring the child's case on an ongoing basis.

2. The Surrey Context

Surrey is the fifth largest county, with an estimated population of 1,214,540 million people, based on ONS Mid 2022:2023 dataset⁴. Based on this data, there is estimated to be 262,625 children aged 0-17, which makes up 22% of the population. We have 128,316 female children under age of 18 and 134,309 male children. Surrey has the sixth highest number of children across all local authorities.

Surrey County Council (CC)'s strategy is set out in the [2030 Community Vision for Surrey](#)⁵. Some of Surrey's key ambitions for children and young people are:

- Children and young people are safe and feel safe and confident.
- Everyone benefits from education, skills and employment opportunities that help them succeed in life.
- Everyone lives healthy, active, and fulfilling lives, and makes good choices about their wellbeing.
- Everyone gets the health and social care support and information they need at the right time and place.

Surrey's Corporate Parenting Board (CPB) provides robust assurance of the whole corporate parenting system, ensuring Surrey is an outstanding corporate parent to its children; and that all looked after children and care leavers can achieve their full potential in life. Surrey CPB puts looked after children and care leavers at the heart of everything we do. The [Corporate Parenting Strategy](#)⁶ has been reviewed and the Strategy 2023 to 2025 covers:

- our vision and high aspirations for our children.
- how we plan to achieve our aims.
- explains how we will fulfil our corporate parenting responsibilities to all our children and young people in care and care leavers.

The [Local Offer for Care Leavers](#)⁷ is accessible online.

⁴ [ONS Mid 2022:2023](#)

⁵ [Community vision for Surrey in 2030 - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

⁶ [Surrey County Council's Corporate Parenting Board and Strategy - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

⁷ [Our local offer to care leavers - Surrey County Council \(surreycc.gov.uk\)](#)

3. The Independent Reviewing Service in Surrey

The Independent Reviewing Service is part of the Quality, Practice, Relationships and Support (QPRS) Division and sits within Quality Assurance Service. It is made up of 4 teams of Independent Chairs, linked to each of the four quadrants in Surrey. The Independent Chairs undertake a dual role, incorporating the Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) and Child Protection Chair role. Each team is supported by a full time Service Coordinator.

At the end of March 2024 there were 29.4 full time equivalent (FTE) Independent Chairs (93% of permanent staff), and caseloads are within the recommended range as set out in the IRO Handbook (2011)⁸ for looked after children. For some Independent Chairs the number of children they have oversight for will increase when taking into consideration children subject to child protection plans. Within the team, there is a range of specialist knowledge and expertise, including knowledge of children with disabilities, unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC), care leavers, fostering and child sexual and criminal exploitation. For the purpose of this report, I will refer to Independent Chairs as IROs, as the work reflected on in this report pertains to their role for looked after children.

During the year we have continued with our drive to have a full complement of permanent staff within the service. We reduced our reliance on agency staff within our service through recruitment of permanent staff, with only 2 agency staff within our 29.4 FTE capacity at the end of this financial year. There continues to be an open recruitment campaign for Independent Chairs with the vision of recruiting permanent staff for the remaining positions held still by agency staff. At the end of the financial year we had a few resignations of permanent staff, either retiring, moving on to new roles both with Surrey and in other local authorities. In the short-term this may lead to an increased use of locum staff, but we also are awaiting the onboarding of 2 permanent staff to take up positions from staff who have left.

We successfully recruited to the long-standing vacancy for one of the Service Coordinator posts and all 4 Service Coordinators are permanent.

4. Key activities of the services during 2023-24

We have undertaken a range of dip sample audits and peer review audits to quality assure our work and service delivery to our looked after children.

Following the recommendations from the [Safeguarding children with disabilities in residential settings](#)⁹ we strengthened our IRO oversight by ensuring all IROs have access to Reg 44 Visitor Reports, in preparation for children's reviews. We completed a dip sample of a number of children's review meeting records, quality assurance that IROs were reviewing Reg 44 Visitor Reports and considering commentary within the reports and challenge raised where appropriate. There was evidence that IROs are implementing these practice expectations, and we will continue to drive forward this area of focus and improvement to our children living in residential settings.

We implemented practice expectations for all children in unregulated placements to have 3-monthly reviews until they have been moved to a suitable regulated placement.

As part of learning from the Coroner's inquest and recommendations following the tragic death of a care leaver who had additional needs, we set up dip sample audits of pathway planning and transaction

⁸ [iro_statutory_guidance_iros_and_las_march_2010_tagged.pdf \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](#)

⁹ [Safeguarding children with disabilities in residential settings - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)

planning for looked after children post 16, eligible for a Pathway Plan and who have an EHCP. Key recommendations following the dip sample audit will be fed back to relevant services and part of the wider service improvement plan. In addition, as part of our reflection and learning from that young person's death, we will now commence chairing the initial pathway plan review after a young person has turned 18. This will enable continuity of independent oversight and scrutiny of actions agreed prior to the young person turning 18.

During the last year we completed the review of our service user feedback forms. These are now available online through MS Forms and can be used at any point in time by the child, their parent, carer, professional network, to provide feedback on our service delivery. We review the feedback quarterly, feeding into any service improvements needed.

We continue to review the quality of our letters to our children through supervision, ensuring we capture their journey between Reviews succinctly and remaining aspirational for our children.

In response to Ofsted's commentary that our midways required a greater focus and evidence of our understanding of the progress a child makes within their placement, we have made changes to our forms, focussing on both the timeliness and quality of completion of midway visits. The findings of the midway dip sample audits evidenced that the child's wishes and feelings were included and captured within all of the dip sample cohort and the vast majority had a reflection on the current lived experience of the child. Furthermore we also built into our midway form where an IRO identified drift and delay, an automatic trigger to the formal alert process. Our performance for midways has significantly improved throughout the year, although this remains an area of focus and improvement for our service going forward into 2024/25.

The Service Coordinators continue to provide monthly Quality Assurance Reports to the local authority which they present at monthly Practice Challenge and Support Meetings, chaired by Assistant Directors. The report will highlighting strengths and good practice in the delivery and quality of work undertaken by social workers. Through the Service Coordinator's report and their attendance they will also raise concerns and provide suggested recommendations for areas of improvement. A bi-monthly report is completed for the Director for Corporate Parenting and Corporate Parenting Board on alerts raised by IROs, which also includes key areas of success and good practice or areas of concern and improvement.

Our continuous focus is on achieving permanency for our looked after children. Through the year we have strengthened our links with the Family Group Conference Service and Reunification Service, to ensure care plans for children are robust and where appropriate and possible, they can be cared for within the family network.

The dip sample audit that focused on children looked after with an Education and Health Care Plan (EHCP) highlighted an area of improvement for our service. It identified a need to be more consistent and robust in our challenge where the recommendations from the EHCP is not sufficiently evidenced or reflected within the child's care plan.

We reviewed, co-created and now co-deliver part of the induction and multi-agency partnership training focusing on looked after children processes, including review meetings.

Following feedback from our care experienced children, that social workers know so much about them, but they do not know anything about their social workers, we created our 'IRO Pen Profile.' Each IRO wrote a few things about themselves, with their photo or an avatar of themselves, including their contact details which was printed on an A5 card. On the other side of the card is a copy of the IRO's

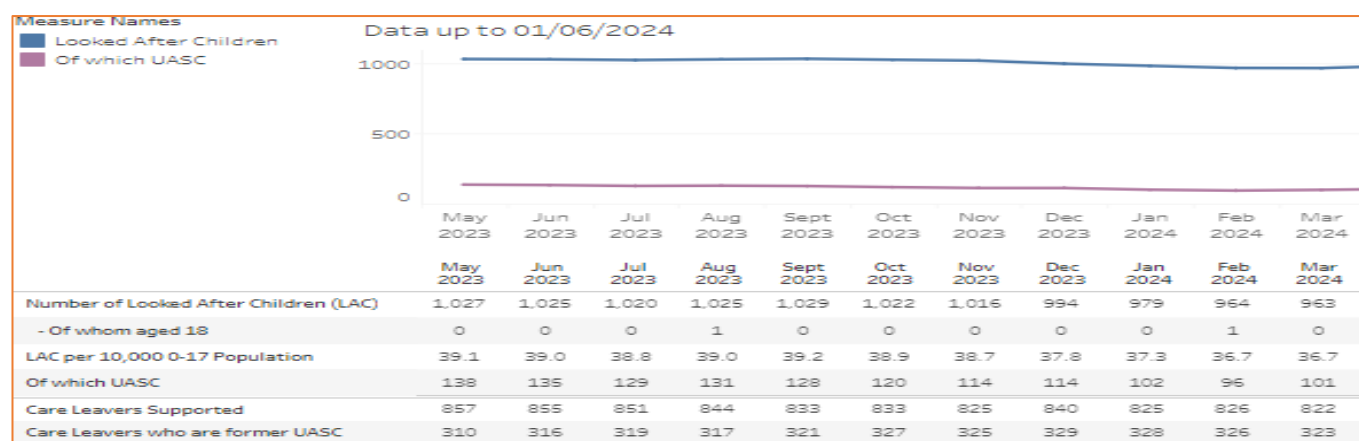
Pledge to their looked after children. Feedback has been very positive, and it has been well received from both children and their carers.

5. Our Looked After Children – demographics

At the end of March 2024 964 children were looked after, and 850 Care Leavers were receiving support from Surrey. This has been a continued decrease in our looked after population compared to previous years. This is attributed to both fewer children becoming looked after and more children ceasing to be looked after. Over the last year Surrey Children’s Service have continued to embed the Family Resilience & Safeguarding Model, which focusses on working with our children and families to deliver better and more timely interventions at an earlier stage. This in turn should enable more children to remain within the family or support networks where it is safe to do so.

5.1 The Number of Children Looked After

The tables below show there is overall an increasing number of children who need to be looked after by Surrey.

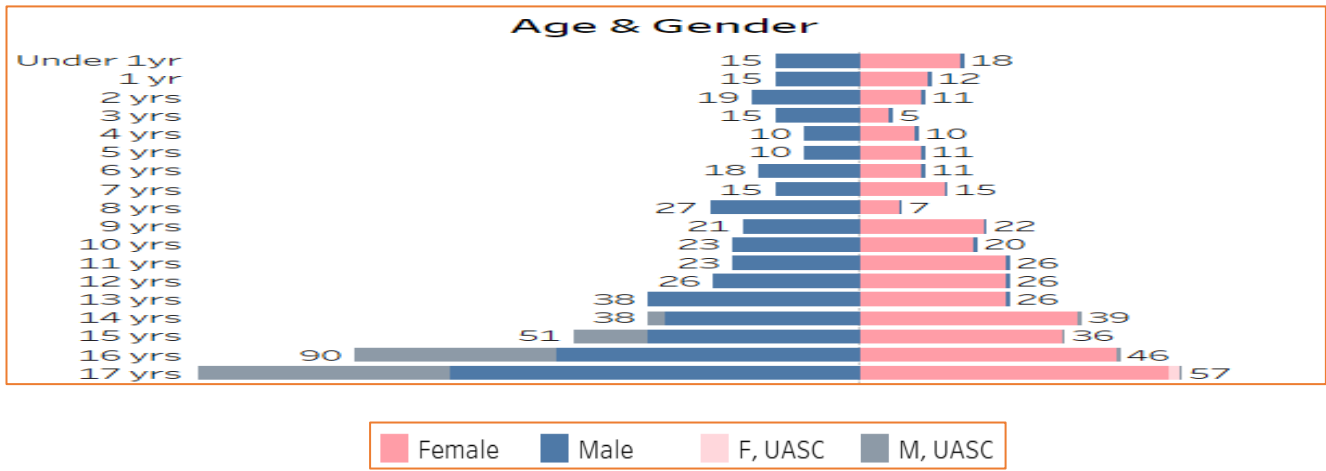


372 Children became looked after during the reporting year, which includes 67 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children; and 425 children ceased to be looked after, which includes 105 unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. The children ceased to be looked after due variety of reasons, with the majority turning 18 and in staying put arrangements or children returned to the care of their birth parents; moved on to living independently; children being adopted or being permanently placed under Special Guardianship Orders.

As noted 67 children seeking asylum were accommodated by Surrey during 2023/24, which is significantly less than the previous year (67 vs 100). They equate to 18% of the total new care entries, which is a drop in projected number based on previous years.

5.2 The Age and Gender of Surrey’s Looked After Children

There has not been any meaningful change in the gender breakdown of Surrey’s looked after children. Currently 59% of our looked after children are male and 41% are female. There has been a slight drop of 2% fewer males being looked after compared to 2022/23. The decrease in fewer males being looked after could be attributed to the decrease of 16- and 17-year-old unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, as there are mainly boys within this cohort of children.

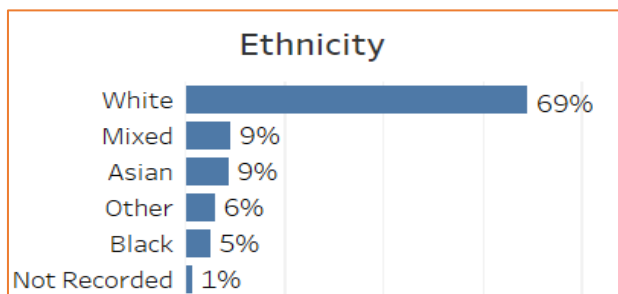


The age profile of children in Surrey has remained similar to last year and broadly in line with national figures. Our largest age group is those over 17 (181 children), but collectively our looked after children between the ages of 15 and 17 make up 41% (404 children) of our looked after population, which is a similar % to last year.

5.3 Ethnicity of Surrey’s Looked After Children

Surrey’s looked after children are predominantly White (69%), with relatively small numbers from, Asian (9%), Mixed (9%), Black (5%) and other (6%) backgrounds. Ethnicity was not recorded for 1% of our looked after children.

There has been a slight increase of 1% in the number of children becoming looked after whose ethnicity is recorded as White and Mixed, whilst a 2% drop for children of Asian ethnicity, whilst a slight drop of 1% for children of Black ethnicity and ‘Other’ has remained the same as 2022/23.



5.4 Independent Reviewing Service Performance

Once a child becomes looked after, their first review should take place within 20 working days, with the second review taking place within three months of the first review and the third and subsequent reviews are held within six months of the previous review. A child’s review meeting can be completed as a single meeting or a series of meetings. The child should be central (taking into consideration age and ability) in making the decision on how they would like their review meeting to be held and who they would want to be part of it and present for their meeting. They may also choose to meet with their IRO separately and then for the rest of their network to meet without them; or have everyone together at the same time. If the review is held as a series of meetings, it must be completed within 20 working days from the initial to the final meeting.

IROs have 5 working days to complete their outcomes or recommendations from the child's Looked After Review and 15 working days to complete the review record (letter) following the completion of the review process.

Based on the service's logbooks & Tableau, IROs completed 2790 looked after reviews during 2023/24. This is fewer reviews compared to 2022/23, which would correspond with the decrease in the number of new looked after children and higher number of children whose care journey ended during 2023/24. It could also be contributed by the slight increase in long-term placement stability over the year, which means fewer children required additional reviews during the year due to change in care plans or unplanned placement moves.

Our performance in completing review records following a looked after review in timescale has slightly improved up to 62% but remains well below expectation and target of 90%. Similar to last year there were a number of contributing factors for the delay which included staffing illness; both with IROs and social workers; blocks in the recording system due to delays of social work reports being completed; or delay by the IROs writing up outcomes and minutes. Ensuring that outcomes and review records are consistently completed in timescales remains to be a key focus for improvement for the service.

IROs continue to evidence their footprint on children's records, completing Quality Assurance (QA) forms following reviews, providing commentary and analysis of areas such as quality of social work reports and recorded visits, as well as engagement with children in reviews. The analysis of the data is fed back to the Social Care teams through the monthly QA Reports produced by Service Coordinators, highlighting performance, areas of good practice and areas for improvement and recommended focus.

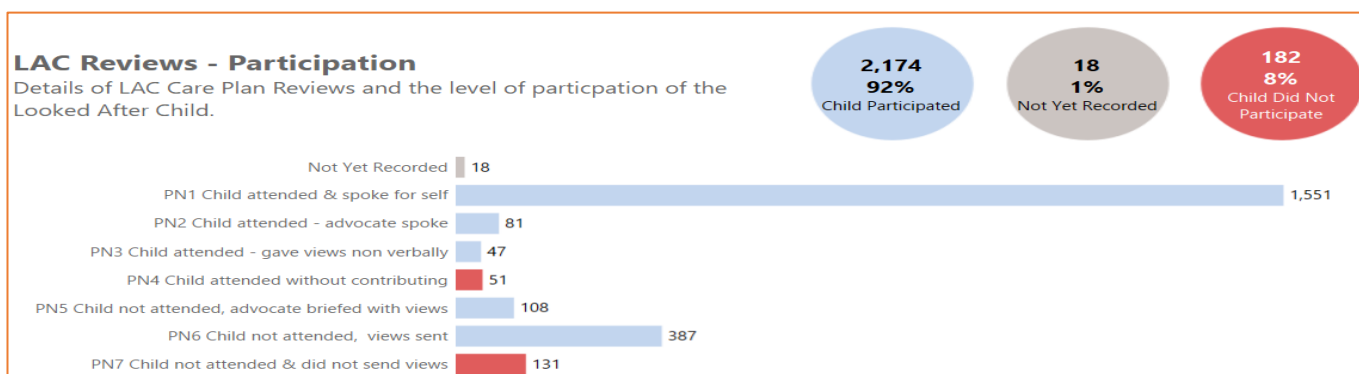
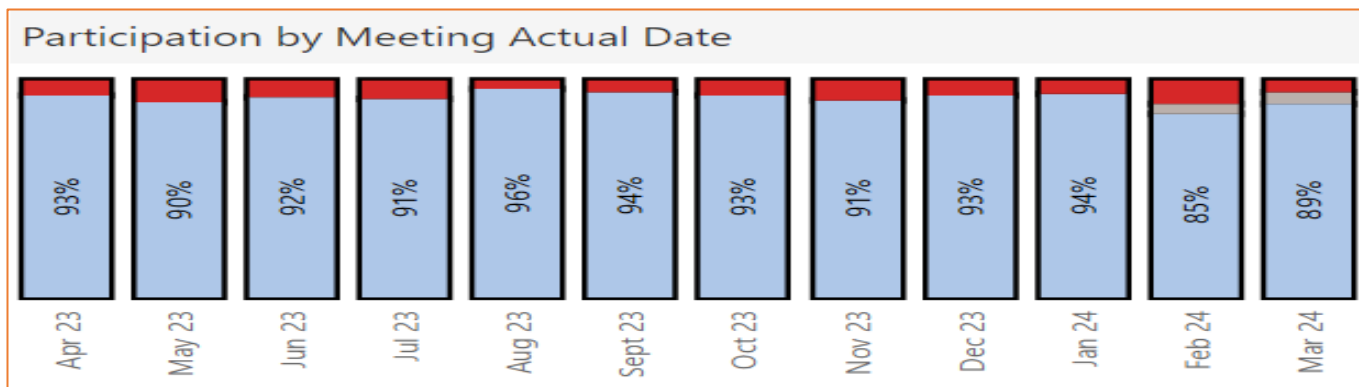
As previously referenced, we reviewed and amended our midway review templates, to ensure more accurate qualitative evidence of progress for a child's care plan and progress within their placement. The aim of the midway review is to meet with the social worker (and anyone else the IRO feels would be relevant or beneficial to include) between review meetings, to track progress of the child's care plan, service delivery and progression to achieving good outcomes. Although an alert can be raised at any point when deemed necessary, a section has been included within the midway review template, if any cause of concern is identified during a midway discussion, which can prompt and direct the IRO to the alert template within LCS.

5.6 Timeliness of Review Meetings

As previously noted IROs completed 2790 looked after reviews during 2023/24. We had a significant improvement of 10% in our timeliness of completing looked after reviews, with our data confirming that 99.9% of children had an up to date looked after review at the end of the financial year. For 4 children it stated their reviews were not held, however in looking into the data all the meetings were held, although there was a delay in recording these within our electronic recording system. For one child her review was held out of timescale due to a late notification that she became looked after.

The timeliness of reviews, timeliness of completion and quality of review records continues to be an area of improvement. This continues to be monitored through Service Coordinators' quality assurance oversight, through practice observations, reviewing in supervision and analysis in the monthly Quality Assurance Report completed by each Service Coordinator.

5.7 Participation of Children in their Looked After Child Reviews



Overall, 92% of children participated in their review meetings during 2023/2024. This is a 3% increase compared to 2022/23. The data above does not include children under the age of 4 who had their looked after reviews during the reporting year.

5% of Children for whom it was recorded that they did not attend and did not send reviews, a number were teenagers who did not wish to attend but met with their IROs separately. 2% of Children were recorded to have attended but did not contribute. Similar to previous years, some young people did not want to engage with their review or their IRO. Other children were not part of their meetings, assessed by their IRO and social worker that they would not manage the meeting, but the IRO saw them separately. For a considerable proportion they were children with disabilities. For some young people, the IROs had seen them separately but had not recorded their observation and what was shared by carers, as their independent view. Work will be done with IROs during the coming year to feel more able to confident to communicated with children with disabilities through receiving Makaton and Pecs training.

Independent Advocacy is available to all looked after children in Surrey, provided through Reconstruct. Children are able to have an independent advocate to enable their participation in their meetings. Following the Doncaster review¹⁰ there has been a big drive to ensure non-verbal or children who do not have the ability to consent to having an advocate, but for whom it is felt it would be in their best interest, have access to a non-instructed advocate. In a recent Transitions planning dip sample audit completed for looked after children with an EHCP and having a Pathway Plan, 80% of children with disabilities had a Reconstruct advocate. This is a significant increase compared to last year. Based on

¹⁰ [Safeguarding children with disabilities and complex health needs in residential settings - Phase 2 \(publishing.service.gov.uk\)](https://publishing.service.gov.uk)

the data collated from IRO QA forms over the year, 10% of looked after children had an advocate, whilst 57% of children or parent declined and for 33% the need for an advocate was deemed not applicable.

5.8 Driving forward achieving permanence

IROs play a key role to ensure timely permanence is secured for looked after children. The traction of permanency plan for a child is reviewed by their IRO through their looked after review meetings and midways reviews. They provide data through completed QA forms which is reported on monthly in the Service Coordinators QA reports.

The first consideration would be for the child to return safely to their parents' care. Or where this is not possible, that suitable family members or connected carers are identified to ensure the child can continue to grow up within their family network. This could either be through Special Guardianship or a Child Arrangement Order. Foster carers may consider permanency through Special Guardianship Order for a child as well. Where it has been assessed that the parents, family, or friends are unable to provide a long-term home for a child, permanency through either adoption or long-term fostering should be secured as timely as possible.

We have continued to support and drive forward permanency for children. During the past year, based on data from Tableau, 149 children returned home. For 26 children permanency was secured through adoption. Permanency was also achieved for a further 29 children through Special Guardianship Orders. More detailed information on adoption is available within the Adoption Annual Report. These permanency arrangements that see children exiting the care system within secure family arrangements are good evidence of the efforts made to secure positive outcomes that support children to remain within a family environment.

Consideration is also given, where appropriate, to reunification within the family network when children have been in care for an extended period of time, and where family circumstance may have changed. Over the last year the links with the Reunification Team and Family Group Conference Service has been strengthened. IROs have recommended engagement with the Reunification Team or referral for a family group conference, to explore who within the child's family network could offer safe and suitable long-term care and support. There has been significant success for work completed with families by the Reunification Team and 87.5% of children that the team assessed and supported, have returned, and remained at home with birth family. Following the introduction of the Edge of Care/S20 Panel, there has also been an increase in referrals to the Family Group Conference (FGC) Service for children who come into care under S20, to explore what support may enable family's to continue to care for children within their own network.

Service Coordinators further support achieving permanency for children in a timely way through regular attendance at Permanency Planning Meetings (PPM) for children in Public Law Outline (PLO) and new to care (either through interim care order or S20). IROs feed into these meetings through their respective Service Coordinator and if there are any concerns re. drift and delay, this is raised.

IROs also recognise the significance part that Independent Visitors can play in the lives of our children in care. At the end of this reporting year 68 children were matched with an IV. The demand for IVs is greater than the capacity of the IV Service, however the local authority has recognised the need and demand and has invested in the service to increase staffing capacity, which would enable increasing the recruitment and support for IVs. For more detailed information about the IV Service and how Independent Visitors support children in care, often over the long term, please see the Independent Visitor Service Annual Report.

6. Dispute Resolution Process

The [IRO handbook](#) requires the Local Authority to have an identified local 'Dispute Resolution Process' to raise concerns about a child's care planning with the operational teams. In Surrey CS, we call this our 'Alert Process.' The alert process will also be used to raise alerts and concerns with any partner agency where the IRO is of the view, they are not fulfilling their corporate parenting responsibilities.

The alert form is embedded within LCS (the electronic recording system) and is completed directly within a child's file. If an alert needs to be raised with a partner agency, a paper version of the alert on the system will be completed and sent to the relevant agency.

6.1 Number and stage of alerts raised

During the past year, 482 alerts were raised for 320 looked after children. This has been a decrease in alerts raised, 42 fewer alerts compared to 2022/23. Fewer informal alerts were raised, dropping from 182 to 151. Despite the overall drop in alerts, there was a slight increase in alerts being raised with team managers, from 242 to 257. However, there was also a decrease in alerts at stage 2, Service Manager, from 87 down to 64. And only 10 alerts were raised to stage 3, Assistant Director level, compared to 12 last year. No alerts were escalated to Director level compared to 1 in 2022/23. No alerts were raised at Stage 5 or 6. All alerts have now been resolved.

Stage	2023/24	2022/23
Informal	151	182
Stage 1	257	242
Stage 2	64	87
Stage 3	10	12
Stage 4	0	1
Stage 5	0	0
Stage 6	0	0
Total	482	524

Overall the views expressed by IROs is that they can see a steady improvement in service delivery for our looked after children, which correlates with the decrease in informal and formal alerts. More Alerts were raised at and resolved at a lower level than last year.

6.2 Reasons for Alerts

The majority of alerts were for a social work assessment report not being completed in timescale for the Looked After Child review, in total 258, followed by 117 alerts due to the case drifting or a plan not being implemented in a timely way. 93 Alerts were raised due to LCS issues, whilst for 39 children visits were not completed within timescale. 105 Alerts were raised under the category or 'other' which could relate to alerts raised to SEND, Gateways to Resources, Allocation of Personal Advisor, school transport, or other areas not covered in one of the reasons outlined below.

The number and reasons for alerts are analysed monthly and fed back through the QA Reports, as well as bi-monthly reports to the Director for Corporate Parenting and Corporate Parenting Board.

Sharing good practice and the timely raising of and resolution of concerns and drift and delay will continue to be a priority area of focus for the Independent Reviewing Service.

It is recognised that during the last year we did not have any children accommodated under S25 in secure accommodation. There is complexity within this as there has been a shortage of secure beds

nationally and some children have had to be accommodated in unregulated placements with Deprivation of Liberty (DoL) in place, to ensure their safety and that of those caring for them. However this is only for a small percentage of children with DoL and those in unregulated placements. The majority of our children with DoL is due to their high level of need due to disability and the consequent level of supervision that could be seen as restrictive.

A key area that had been identified by IROs is the importance of life story work. This starts from day one that a child becomes looked after and begin their journey in care. Whether they return home within a short period of time or remain in long-term care or are placed for adoption, it is crucial that each child understands their journey and the reasons for being in care and their experiences whilst cared for. This area for improvement has been highlighted through monthly QA reports. The Local Authority in their self-assessment for children looked after work also recognised the ongoing development and improvement needed in life story work. A great deal of work has been done and is ongoing, focusing on the language we use in recording children’s journeys through care. We have listened to our children in their feedback on what language to use and for them to have a better understanding of their journey in our care.

REASONS FOR ALERTS		2023/24	Total
A	Report/assessment has not been completed in time	258	285
B	Child's wishes and feelings contradict the care plan	15	6
C	IRO disagrees with LA care plan	26	17
D	Plan not implemented in a timely way	117	127
E	Assessments not thorough enough	19	9
F	Delay in PLO/legal gateway meetings taking place	6	6
G	Incomplete LCS issues causing drift and delay	93	94
H	Concerns the child's placement is not meeting their needs	31	28
I	The child or young person has not been visited in timescales and/or not seen alone	20	39
J	Health assessments/PEPs not completed in time	6	15
K	There are safeguarding issues which are not being address or resolved	26	8
L	The child is in immediate danger	1	4
M	Lack of permanency planning	29	22
N	Human rights may be being breached.	4	7
O	Other	105	47
	Total	775	714

6.3 Key areas of challenge and concern raised by the Independent Reviewing Service

Alongside raising areas of good practice and challenge for individual children by their IRO, over the past year the service have also raised some collective issues of challenge and concern within Children’s Services. The challenges remain similar to previous reporting years, which include:

- National and local challenge of lack of regulated care provisions, which impacts on our children in care in Surrey, leading to some children being cared for in unregulated provisions.
- Ongoing timeliness of updating of care plans/pathway plan and reports before a child’s review meeting, to present to current and up to date care plan/pathway plan for the IRO to review.
- Staffing crisis within social work, which has impacted on the timely progression of care plans and relationships with children. This also impacts on meaningful life story work being completed.

- Timeliness of completion of assessments/reports for children's reviews.
- Transition planning for children approaching adulthood, in particular those with additional needs that will require ongoing support and intervention from Adults' Services.
- Challenges with placement sufficiency and matching of placements with children needing to come into care and children with complex needs.
- Delay in being able to access input and support for our children who have suffered childhood trauma, due to high demand on services such as New Leaf. Although this is more a challenge for children placed outside of Surrey.

6.4 Impact and examples of good practice for our children through the intervention and support by their Independent Reviewing Officers and Social Workers

IROs work tirelessly alongside social workers, our children's carers, parents, educational staff, health professionals and any other professional or volunteer supporting our children, to ensure that they have the right care plan that meets their holistic needs. IROs will attend additional meetings where this is appropriate to ensure the care plan is right for the child. They work collaboratively to try and resolve any issues of concern as soon as this is identified. They will escalate through the formal process when needed.

Evaluating impact is essential for all services, to consider areas of strengths and identify areas for improvement and understand the impact and effectiveness of the service. There is a range of methods we use to collate information to assist in evaluating impact such as the alert process, feedback through complaints, feedback from service users, informal feedback shared by children and their network with IROs and their managers and so forth.

Through the reviewing of care plans/pathway plans for a child's review, the review itself, the midway meeting held between statutory reviews, all contribute to the timely progression of a child's care provision and meeting that child's needs. With the additional oversight of an IRO, any areas of drift or delay should be highlighted as quickly as possible, in order to address and resolve.

The Independent Reviewing Service continues to be one of the more stable and consistent services for our looked after children, though there has been some movement within the service this year, leading to change of IRO for children.

Below are some examples of commentary or reflections of good practice and positive feedback shared by young people, IROs, parents, carers, professionals of work completed by social workers or IROs:

- Feedback from the Social Worker about the IRO: "The IRO she develop positive relationships with the children with whom they work, and her reviews are always child focused, and her approach is solution focused."
- Feedback from the IRO about the Social worker: "The social Worker has provided steadfast and excellent support to their young people whose needs are complex. The Social Worker has been the target of challenging behaviours from the young person and their family. She has persevered and remains very child focused and aiming for good outcomes for the young person."
- Feedback from the IRO about the Social Worker: "Well done to the Social Worker for all of her hard work on progressing family time contact with a set of children and their mother. This is an extremely difficult situation however; she has worked hard to build a really positive working

relationship with their mother and has shown compassion and respect for her situation and how she works with her. A number of very experienced social workers have tried to progress this in the past and have not been able to do this however, she has managed to get plans in place for the children, for the next year. I wanted to acknowledge her hard work around this, especially in light of the fact that she is an ASYE.”

- Feedback from foster carers about an IRO: “I just wanted to say thank you for all your work with the two girls in our care,.....During the LAC review that we had on 6th February 2024, I was actually in awe of the way you dealt with some very delicate issues with the girls' birth mother. Your warm, understanding attitude, I felt, helped to keep what could have been potentially difficult conversations on track and professional, so that everyone was listened to and also had the opportunity to have their say.”
- Feedback from the foster carers about the IRO: “The IRO’s have had a positive impact. Annemie particularly sorted out funding for our young person to continue with his outdoor project, she left their house at 5pm and by 9.30am the next morning funding was sorted out.”
- Feedback from foster carers who have adopted their 9-year-old foster child, about the IRO and the Social Worker: “... We are overjoyed to finally have true permanence for our child and for our family and to be able to call ourselves her parents in every sense of the word. This could not and would not have been achieved if it had not been for the fierce and unrelenting dedication and advocacy has received from the social worker. Our child’s IRO has also supported us all and been a vital part of our child’s story for the last couple of years.”
- Feedback from the IRO about the Social worker: “ The Social Worker is a child centred and determined social worker ... I was struck this week by a child running up to her with a huge smile at a first adoption review – she had met him twice and although he is only little, she had clearly made a huge impact.”

7. Summary and key areas of focus for the service for the coming year include:

The year continued to be extremely busy, completing 2790 reviews plus all associated quality assurance functions such as midways, QA forms, and other expectations for IROs. We have seen some areas of improvement in our performance, although there continues to be more work to be done to consistently reach our target expectations, both in timeliness and quality. Performance was impacted due to staff sickness, which was managed and covered within the service capacity. Despite some changes in staffing, overall we have continued to give consistency and continuity to our children in care through their IRO relationship.

We will continue to strengthen our relationships with our children in care, including visiting children between review meetings at midway point. Any additional visits will be child and need led, therefore may be required and appropriate for some children, but not for others. This would be in addition to seeing them for their looked after review meetings.

We continuously review our Service Plan to ensure we keep on track with our identified areas of improvement and focus. Many key areas will continue to be our focus into 2024/25, aligned to the overarching Directorate Business Plan .

Key areas of focus for 2024/2025 include:

- Continue to promote active participation of children in their reviews to ensure their views are shared and listened to, which will include collaborating with User Voice and Participation to promote the use of independent support and advocacy, for all children, including non-instructed advocacy for children with disabilities.
- Further develop skills of IROs to be more proficient in communicating with our non-verbal looked after children and children with disabilities, through Makaton and Pecs training and refreshing on observational skills.
- Improve in participation of children in their reviews, in particular children with disabilities and teenagers.
- Continue to provide consistent and effective challenge to practice through alerts by keeping the child's needs at the centre of our interventions and actions.
- Increase performance in completion of midway meetings, QA forms and oversight completed and recorded in a timely manner on children & young people's case records.
- Collaborate with operational colleagues to ensure quality assuring assessments and reports for reviews accurately reflect the child and family's identity and this is taken into consideration in assessment and service delivery.
- Improve in performance in timeliness of completion of outcomes and letters/minutes following looked after reviews.
- Continue to focus on SMART child centred outcomes-based recommendations to support delivery and driving forward of a child's care plan/pathway plan.
- Continued focus on children in unregulated and unassessed placements, holding more frequent reviews and reviewing children's care arrangements who live in residential homes.
- IROs to chair the first Pathway Plan Review after a young person turns 18

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